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ABSTRACT

Attempts are made in this address to outline how social change in Australia affects the nurturing tasks of family life and to suggest a rethinking of how the community as a whole might assist the child development process. Changes in the Australian family context include divorce, family breakdown, one-parent families, remarriage, extended three-generation families, smaller nuclear families, population mobility, employed women, low incomes for working women, and unemployment. Given this context of change, the question is raised: What major propositions about early childhood development bear on the topic of change and the need to involve the community in the societal responsibilty for children? Ten propositions based on theoretical and empirical grounds are advanced and compared, and their implications for Australian early childhood educators are drawn. Knowing how unequal families are in the economic and cultural resources they provide, the authors assert that the educators of Australia's young children should build on each family context and assist parents in their efforts to develop children with a sense of their own self-worth. This goal can only be reached with concerted social effort in a time of rapid social change. (RH)

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Don Edgar & Gay Ochiltree

Family Change and Early Childhood Development

Paper presented at the 16th National Triennial Conference of the Australian Early Childhood Association titled 'Being and Becoming' held in Hobart, Tasmania, 24-28 May 1982.

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The theme of this paper was prompted by a dissatisfaction with the way developmental theories match the nature of social change and an impatience with several propositions that continue to be made on the basis of poor evidence. Our concern is to try to outline how social change affects the nurturing tasks of family life and to suggest a re-thinking of how the community as a whole might assist the child development process.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) in recent years has formulated for the psychology of child development what sociologists have always asserted: that each individual develops within a context, under socially determined situational constraints, that there is an ecology of human development which varies across cultures, across status groups, across physical, geographic and political boundaries, across families and even (for the individual child) across time within the context of a single family. Not only are those varied contexts themselves subject to more or less rapid change; change is also the essence of every individual's life no matter what the context. As Samuel Butler put it many years ago,

'All our lives long, every day and every hour,
we are engaged in the process of accommodating
our changed and unchanged selves to changed and
unchanged surroundings; living, in fact, is
nothing else than this process of accommodation;
when we fail in it a little we are stupid, when we
fail flagrantly we are mad, when we suspend it
temporarily, we sleep, when we give up the attempt
altogether, we die.'

(quoted in Anthony and Chiland, 1978:3)

Butler can be forgiven for omitting to mention Piaget's theme of adaptation, the active moulding of the environment as opposed to merely accommodating to it, but society in his day appeared stronger than the individual. Doubtless it still is.

It is Bronfenbrenner (1982:38) too, who has insisted that an

' "ecological transition" occurs, whenever, during the life course, a person enters a new role or setting . . . such events include arrival of a younger sibling, entry into day care or school, graduation, finding a job, going on vacation, becoming ill . . . marrying, moving, becoming divorced, changing jobs, remarrying, retiring and that final transition to which there are no exceptions – dying.'

More than that, we must insist with Bronfenbrenner, that every environment involves more than one setting. That is why research on child development and the growth of self through the life course is so difficult. The environment of school for example has varied settings and interacts with the 'eco-systems' of the family and work, each of which contributes in complex ways to each child's capacity to learn. Disappointingly few studies have looked at the

complexity of settings as they affect child development and fewer still have examined the impact of 'ecological transitions' on either cognitive, social or moral development as children grow in self-awareness and maturity.

Moreover, too many theorists in child development are adult-oriented and view the process still as a passive one of the child being influenced by significant adults, rather than as an active one where the child vigorously pursues its own ends, trying to produce effects, succeeding or failing to control its own environment. Researchers such as Robert White (1959), Margaret Donaldson (1978) or Hanus Papousek (1969) remind us that even babies are motivated not just by rewards but by the sense of satisfaction gained when they succeed in producing effects which build an inner representation of their own world, which allows them to *predict* and, hence, survive.

The difficulty is that the world for many children is neither predictable nor controllable, because the contexts in which they live are too rapidly changing and too traumatic. This fact has implications for family and community organisation which must be critically examined.

Let me outline briefly the sorts of changes taking place in the family contexts of Australian children. Divorce has increased from 10 per 10 000 population in 1971 to 28 per 10 000 in 1980, with a huge 'hiccup' of 45 per 10 000 in 1976 because the new *Family Law Act* released a flood of couples whose marriages had broken down at least 12 months before.

An even greater number of marriages break down to the point of separation, desertion, wife-bashing, child abuse or a teeth-gritting but conflict-ridden 'hanging-in-there' situation. There are no figures on 'breakdown' as opposed to divorce 'breakup', but the iceberg's submerged presence is betrayed by the fact that 80 per cent of legal aid money in 1980 was spent on family disputes such as custody, maintenance or access orders. As a result, one-parent families have more than doubled from 130 600 in 1969 to 282 200 in 1981 (i.e. 13.2 per cent of all families with dependent children in Australia).

But perhaps more dramatically, a total of 459 200 dependent children were living in 1980 with one parent rather than two. Since 1976 alone, nearly 5 per cent of all children under age 18 (a total of 232 549) have been affected by divorce. We have no idea how many thousands of others are affected by their parents' inability to live together harmoniously. In the United States, Mary Jo Bane (1979) estimates that one-third of all children have separated parents, and that 50 per cent of all US children are likely to spend an average of 5-6 years in a one-parent home.

What this means is not so obvious however. One-parent status is not usually forever, especially for men who remarry more quickly than women. The access parent is still a significant figure in a child's life, even if only having weekend or less frequent contact.

Remarriage gives children 3 or 4 parents instead of 2, what I call 'plus parents' in preference to the old imprecation step-parent. Remarriage also gives children, quite often, both step-brothers and sisters, who share blood kinship with one of the newly married partners only, and half-brothers and sisters from the new marriage. Whereas in 1968 only one in eight marriages involved partners who had been previously married, by 1978 this had increased to one in three of all marriages (McDonald, 1980).

Apart from that sort of change in family structure, there are more grandparents around than there used to be. Historically, we have more extended three-generation families now than ever before because people live longer. But it is grandmother who is the more likely to figure with 61 per cent of women aged 70 and over widowed, and 12 per cent either divorced, separated or single. They may well be living with married sons and daughters and their young children; or, more likely, separated sons and daughters will have moved back in with them for cheap housing. The family context of child development there is radically different from that of the nuclear family household.

Couples are also choosing to have fewer children and to have them later. This is a good thing if it means greater preparedness and economic security, but it means fewer siblings with smaller family size, and a greater likelihood that children will be seen as interfering with the couple's well-established, free and highly mobile life-style.

Mobility also counteracts the possible benefits of having grandparents around. Australians are the most mobile home-changers in the world, so demands on child care, baby-sitters and home help go outside the family into neighbourhood and public sources.

The proportion of married women in the workforce has increased from 32.5 per cent in 1969 to 42 per cent during the last three years. A lesser known fact is that of 800 000 females employed in 1945, only 53 400 returned to full-time home duties to make way for returned servicemen (Beaton, 1982). So the phenomenon of mothers working is not so new. It must be pointed out that most of these women work part-time, not full-time, which means the two-income family is rather a misnomer. Their part-time wages supplement family income, but if they lose a husband, they do *not* have a living wage.

Thus the significance of working women lies more in the lack of time left over for parenting, the rush, the tiredness of carrying two jobs, one poorly paid, the other not 'paid' and very often unrelieved by male parenting or household help. It also lies in the poverty of one-parent families and the impact this has on children through poor nutrition, inadequate housing, restricted opportunities for those wider experiences better-off families take for granted.

The average income for married couples with dependent children was $16 580 in 1978/79, whereas the average for female-headed one-parent units was $6 130. No-one can deny that the opportunity structure for children in the latter context (nearly half a million children) is severely limited. What is worse, part-time jobs in the low income manufacturing area are those most affected by economic recession and unemployment, so one-parent and migrant family contexts are getting worse, not better.

Unemployment is now double the 1974 rate, with close to half a million families affected. In the Institute of Family Studies' project on family support networks virtually no families were formed which had not experienced problems of unemployment either directly or indirectly. In Australia the average duration of unemployment has increased from 6.5 weeks (August 1974) to 32.7 weeks (May 1981) with the highest rate of 58 weeks being for males aged 35-54, that is men who are likely to have young children or grandchildren who will be affected.

Now, given this context of family change, what are the major propositions about early childhood development? What do experts say is desirable for children to grow as competent individuals, the 'Being and Becoming' of this Conference? Obviously there are many which cannot be covered here, so I have chosen those that bear on the topic of change and the need to involve the community in the *societal* responsibility for children.

PROPOSITION 1: a child needs the enduring irrational involvement of one or more adults in care and joint activity with the child.

This is a long-standing notion that clearly has some validity. From Freud's early emphasis on the emotional significance of the mother, to Erikson's stress on the mother's role in a child's achievement of that firm sense of personal trustworthiness which forms the basis of identity, to the excesses of Bowlby and others talking of bonding to the mother after birth and maternal deprivation in institutional settings, we have finally come to realize that it is not so much *which* adult that matters, so long as there *is* an adult who cares, who is mad about the child, whose functions are diffuse and limitless rather than specific and detached (Katz, 1982).

However, this raises several problems in relation to modern childhood. Too much or too prolonged a pattern of 'irrational involvement' may in fact be detrimental to the child's development. Not only in the family setting, where a mother is expected to do and put up with everything a child cares to dish out, but also in the peer and later school setting, the harsh reality of social life refuses to offer an irrational assent to the ego's demands.

In other words, irrational parenting may be undesirable rather than a requirement of healthy development. A child can only learn the limits of selfhood if there *are* limits set and we should be careful not to confuse love with a confusing and confused permissiveness. That is why Lilian Katz (1982) rightly insists on optimum attachment, optimum irrationality, optimum spontaneity on the part of the mother. Note that even she talks of mothering, not parenting, but her point is that too much or too little attachment, irrationality or spontaneity is bad for the child's social development. She leaves open the answer to 'how much is too much?', yet she makes an important point in this regard. Katz argues that a slippage of roles is dangerous in early childhood. A parent who becomes too much of a teacher, or a child care agent or teacher who becomes too much of a parent, will be dysfunctional for the child. The teacher's role or the day care worker's role is and should be more specific, less affectively involved, more rational, more intentional and more concerned with the whole group than a parent can or needs to be. Pressure on parents to take on instructional functions, home intervention programs, skill training and so on may lead to a situation where 'the child has no mother' (Katz, 1982:7). Notice again the easy slip into mothering.

In contrast Bronfenbrenner makes a further proposition.

PROPOSITION 2: that the developmental impact of emotionally involved care and joint activity with the child is enhanced by the participation of adults of both sexes.

He insists that he is not stigmatising one parent families or saying they are less effective than intact two-parent families. But he is recognising the research evidence that in the USA one fifth of all children spend some time in a one-parent situation, that these families often do not work as well, that children often show emotional disturbance and cognitive disadvantage and that where one-parent kids are doing well, it is because there is a third party (usually the ex-husband) available for support (Hetherington et al, 1979).

The Australian figures are not so dramatic. neither is the US evidence so convincing. The point for us is that if both sexes are needed, for whatever reason (role modelling, economic support, wider cognitive stimulation), then schools and the wider community ought to be providing male as well as female adults for those growing numbers of children who lack one or the other. Yet there is still a prejudice against males in child care, in kindergartens, as nurses, as primary school teachers. Patricia Sexton (1969) made a rather hysterical point of this in her book *The feminized male* and Daniel Moynihan (1966) also over-reacted in his critique of mother-dominance in the American black family. Nonethless, the logic of the two propositions just outlined is that society must face the consequences of marital breakdown, not be indifferent to the sorts of settings in which children are placed, and actively provide adults of appropriate kinds, with appropriate roles and skills to assist child development processes.

A related proposition is:

PROPOSITION 3: that fathering is just as important as mothering not only in terms of irrational involvement with the child but also in terms of the models for maturity provided to the child.

The work of Lamb (1975) in the US, of Graham Russell (1980) in Australia and my own work on Australian adolescents (Edgar 1980) all suggests that the father has been a forgotten figure in child development. Given that males have held the dominant power and authority positions within society for so long, it is extraordinary to have supposed their very presence and behaviour in the home were unimportant to children.

Men are now learning the art of parent-child intimacy, the 'parenting trade' and beginning to follow the dictum of Letty Pogrebin's book *Growing up free* (1980). 'Don't be the man you think you should be, be the father you wish you'd had'. She points to the way definitions vary: maternal deprivation becomes father absence; the male dominated household is called traditional whereas the female-dominated is called matriarchal. She points to the bonding myth and its Madonna and Child view which pushes father out of the picture; to the need for fathers to attach to the child early on if healthy relationships are to grow and if that sense of loss reported by adolescents about their 'unknown' fathers is to be avoided. Men and women who stop their sons from playing dolls or houses are in fact preventing them from acting out the father-parent role, from putting the developing self in the place of the male in the household with whom the son is supposed to identify. As Pogrebin (1982) puts it, 'our culture creates an aversion to the very activities that make a man a good father', instead teaching males to screen their behaviour, to avoid participation in parenting, to deny their own input into the child's development.

PROPOSITION 4: that continuity and sameness are essential elements of trust, a sense of meaning and predictability in the child's social environment, the development of a sense of control and an affirmation of identity.

Few would quibble with this version of Erikson's comments on ego development. Nor with the associated later stage.

PROPOSITION 5: that a sense of industry, the experience of producing things beside and with others is crucial to the child's appreciation of the division of labour, of differential opportunity, of self-worth rather than inferiority.

Yet notice what is implied here. First, continuity may not be possible because both settings and people change. With high occupational mobility, familiar home surroundings, the security of the back yard and one's own room cannot be guaranteed. With marriage breakdown, desertion, separation and divorce, there is little chance for a child to trust, to make meaning out of the situation or to feel he/she is in control of the home and its social environment.

For example, we know that pre-school children are adversely affected by divorce. Wallerstein and Kelly's work (1974) suggests that both boys and girls in the 2½ – 3½ year age group responded to divorce with observable behavioral change – crying, whining, regression, irritability, anxiety, sleep problems. This was in spite of the fact that all but one stayed with their mother in a familiar environment. Their play was restricted and joyless and the toy world was seen as unsafe. After a year they showed a strong need for closeness, even with strangers. What counted most for children was the degree of conflict between parents and the quality of caretaking able to be given by mothers distracted with their own adult problems.

The middle pre-school group was less inclined to regress but were fearful, 'their concept of the dependability of human relationships and of objectives was profoundly shaken, and they were frightened, confused and sad'. Moreover, they tended to blame themselves for their father's departure, a timely reminder that children see themselves as *active* not passive participants in the family drama.

With the oldest pre-school group (5-6), aggression and anxiety increased though their cognitive ability to interpret the situation was better and their developmental progress appeared unimpaired at later interviews.

Another study by Hetherington and Cox (1979) found boys and girls from divorced homes less happy, more anxious, depressed, guilty and apathetic than other children. They showed less imaginative play with less co-operative and constructive relations in play activities, an interesting reminder of the importance of play in acting out (or suppressing) the realities children have to test in life. Perhaps even more significantly in this study, teacher interaction with children from divorced homes, particularly boys, was more negative or ambivalent, a finding supported by a study (Edgar & Headlam, 1982) of teachers' attitudes to children from one-parent families.

In short, large numbers of children do *not* grow up in the ideal, intact home with nuclear family role models, so the contexts of child development are in themselves changing. Parenting in such altered circumstances is difficult and requires support; child care providers, kindergarten and pre-school teachers, neighborhood self-help centres must all face the challenge and adapt their methods to family and childhood needs.

The second implication of the proposition about the importance of industry and productivity to self-worth is that all children should be given the chance to make things, do things, produce effects on their environment. I have written extensively about this before in terms of competence as including two elements – first, the 'equipment for competence' (the family background resources, language styles, interpretive skills and range of roles available to a child) and second, 'the competent self' which emerges differentially from the child's success or failure in dealing with and in acting *on* the world. As Brewster-Smith (1969) puts it, successive experiences of

success build into a 'benign circle of socialisation'; but let a child experience the reverse, and failure after failure builds into a vicious circle of incompetence which colours the rest of life.

> 'The competent self that emerges will depend upon our symbolic capacity (which largely depends upon language) and the range of roles that are available to us. It will depend on our learning skills of interpretation, presentation of self and impression-management, and the degree of cynicism with which we handle social situations. In short, our structural location in society determines our chances of sharing the necessary 'equipment for competence' that constructs our individual sense of 'the competent self'. (Edgar, 1980:157)

I do not wish to labour the point of unequal opportunities, but rather to put another proposition.

PROPOSITION 6: that the family as it is constituted today may provide inadequate play, inadequate linguistic and interpretive skills, too narrow a range of roles for children to emulate, for the adequate development of either autonomy or initiative or industry as the bases of a competent sense of self-worth.

Here I can only cite briefly the sort of evidence that bears on such a proposition. The context is that of family change described at the start of this paper: viz, more one-parent families, fewer siblings, more grandparents, fewer relatives, greater housing mobility, more mothers working, less time for parents to parent, inadequate consideration by the economic system of job demands on parents, provision of adequate child-care arrangements and the value disjunction between parental rights to self-explore and the rights of children to be properly nurtured. The isolated housewife syndrome is probably less valid now than the harried two-job woman; the latch-key child less valid than the TV-addicted family; the language of the mass media more common (and limited) than status group differences in language skills; and the time for family interaction more restricted than ever before.

Children from economically disadvantaged homes, from homes riddled with conflict and loss of significant adults, inevitably lack opportunities to build up varied experiences, to play at roles in ways that enhance their cognitive ability to interpret (and, hence, control) the world they live in. A Victorian ACCESS skills project in 1980 showed that such children could not even interpret the simpler elements of Marie Clay's *Sand* test (1972), a modified book in which children are asked to find a page, a picture, front, back, or a word. The writing ability of older children was limited to their experience of TV shows and their imaginations stultified. Parents who restrict their children's play contribute most to such stultification, but so do communities which fail to provide playgrounds, child care facilities, kindergartens or pre-schools, stimulating children's TV programs, help for parents in guiding children or facilities where expert advice can be sought. An unstated link between all of the above points is another

PROPOSITION 7: that parents, not peers, are the significant others in early childhood development.

I want to challenge that assumption by

PROPOSITION 8: that siblings and peers are as significant as adults, if not more so, in the development of moral values and in achieving a sense of worthwhile identity.

I base this on long-standing theory that tends to have been ignored in much of the subsequent research. Talcott Parsons (1951) argued that every actor in a situation faces a series of choices, major dilemmas of orientation. He spoke of five 'pattern variables' which are echoed (often unwittingly) in the child development literature. Tasks can be approached either from a viewpoint of affectivity, self interest, particularistic emotional bonds, ascribed rights and roles, and diffuseness; or from a viewpoint of neutrality, group interest, universalism, achievement and specificity. Notice how closely this follows Freudian Eriksonian notions of the difference between familial relationships and external relations with strangers in the outside world. It is this same scheme that guides Lilian Katz's call for keeping a distinction between mother and teacher roles. She does not acknowledge either Parsons or Robert Dreeben (1967) who developed the scheme in a detailed series of propositions about the functional nature of a child's movement out of the diffuse and particularistic world of the home and into the more achievement-oriented and equal status world of school and peer group.

Erikson (1975) too, distinguishes between the pre-school child's conformity to adults as knowers where the self is defined as learner and the more autonomous, mature attitude that grows from peer group challenge and reality testing.

It is Piaget (1954) and Sullivan (1947) who gave greater attention to the importance of peer group contexts. In early childhood, adult rules save the child from trial and error and give the child a firm place in the world of meaning, whereas later cognitive development and especially moral development depend upon testing of ideas and self in equal status, reciprocal situations. As Youniss (1980) puts it.

'Piaget proposes that peers begin to interact with a naive sense of equality which is gained through the practice of direct reciprocity. One is free to behave exactly as the other has in an exchange. This eventually brings peers to a mutual understanding'.

Children have little control over one another. They clearly commence sociable behavior almost as early with other children (if any are present) as they do with their parents, tweaking noses and poking at others as objects, but gradually learning to share ideas, to communicate, to be friends. Zick Rubin (1980) suggests this process of reciprocal learning from peers starts very early, yet it has been virtually ignored in child development research.

The implications for us are several. If children learn constraint and co-operation through peers (Youniss, 1980), if they learn that meaning is constructed *with* other, not just imposed on them, if they learn that the self and its view of reality is not the only possible version, then the earlier they learn that the better. Yet we still hear the emphasis on parenting, on teaching kids the proper values, on the family's responsibility for how children are reared. The ideas of the Israeli Kibbutz or of China's sub-ordination of the individual to the collective may have been too extreme, but the opposite is *not* isolation of the child in the home with a frustrated mother. What is needed is exposure of every child to peer relationships at an early age to assist development and innovation. With smaller families and less neighbourly neighbourhoods, the need becomes greater for children and families to be re-surrounded by a more concerned and caring community.

This leads me to my last two points.

PROPOSITION 9: that the Australian community's indifference to children, as reflected in the scattered and unequal provision of child-support services and in the piecemeal, inconsistent development of children's policies, is a major contributing factor to inadequate moral, cognitive and social development of children and

PROPOSITION 10: that positive measures can be taken to improve early childhood development, through changes in the way family, school and community organise their approach to the problem.

All I can do here is to list some of the problems that exist and suggest a few alternative approaches. Kindergartens, pre-schools and child-care centres are not equally available to children in each State, each town or city. The 1979 NSW Children's Services Study, for example, found only one place in child care centres was available for every sixty to eighty children who needed a place in the poorer working class areas of Sydney. The Knox Report (Wadsworth 1976) found only four hundred of the 2500 children under five of working mothers were catered for in day care centers. Infant Welfare Centres are limited in their functions to weighing babies and making up feeding formulae, yet the best of the infant Welfare Sisters are asked for, and give constantly, advice on a whole range of child-rearing concerns. If encouraged and differently staffed they could do much more.

There is confusion about the pros and cons of community child care, family day care, child care centres, pre-schools. Funding support varies inconsistently across the Commonwealth and there is virtually no monitoring or evaluation of which schemes work best for which families. Control of funding is split between the Office of Child Care at the Commonwealth level, State departments of health, education and community welfare, and local government levels. The latter, in particular, vary in what they provide.

Worse than that, no funds were allocated for new child care centres in the Federal budget in 1981; the Spender Report (1981) suggested a means test for subsidised child care and a pilot program to subsidise privately owned child care centres using funds already allocated to non-profit centres. Such thinking flies in the face of the economic reality of women who cannot earn a living without having places to leave their children. It also ignores the question of quality care versus profit and takes no account of the plight of non-working mothers who also need occasional child care facilities. I fully endorse the call of the National Women's Advisory Council for a complete re-thinking of Federal government policies and funding of child care.

At the broader societal level, Australia has nothing comparable to Sweden's comprehensive family support schemes, where men are entitled to share six months' paid parental (not maternity) leave when a child is born; three months' leave at any time before the child's eighth birthday, 12 days' leave to look after children if they are ill, and the right to job-share with their wives if they so choose. Nor do we have anything comparable to the French system which aims at systematic relief of family hardship and which recognises that the economic needs of families differ according to the stages of their life cycle. The welfare of children in France is all-important, with generous maternity allowances, tax deductions and child endowment (Charlesworth 1980).

Unlike Australia, the French provide for maintenance of income at levels which avoid poverty for both one and two-parent families. Rent subsidies are provided so that rental costs do not have the effect of leaving familes with almost nothing to live on, and costs of travel on public transport are reduced for life for parents. Such a system would alleviate the impact of changes resulting from separation, divorce, unemployment, handicap, sudden trauma. The rhetoric of support for families needs to be matched by that sort of reality.

We also need a closer interface between families and those who can advise them. The experts on child-rearing cannot stand apart. There has to some pathway between the professionals and a more effective, do-it-yourself sense of parental responsibility. Moreover that link must not separate early childhood from later stages of development.

The model of the Early Childhood Development Complexes in Australia needs to be extended so there is more two-way traffic, with input from the community as well as from multi-disciplinary experts on the staff. A South Australian suggestion from Don Matters is that 'Neighbourhood Family Resource Centres' be established which would be locally-based and managed by parents. These centres would provide a drop-in, call-up-for-advice base and would co-ordinate access to experts on child health, parenting skills, handling family finances, youth problems, infant welfare – any aspect of the nurturing functions families are supposed to fulfill.

Don Matters has prepared a report which will be published soon. He has costed the provision Australia-wide of such Neighbourhood Family Resource Centres at round $300 million per year. But they would replace much more expensive and scattered services which parents at present have difficulty in locating. His rationale is similar to that used by Kenneth Keniston in his 1977 report on US families. As Keniston puts it, parents can no longer fully prepare children for life in our complex society. Instead, the new job for parents is to act as an executive – choosing, finding and co-ordinating experts involved in the upbringing of their children. Finding health care centres, doctors, welfare advisers, kindergartens, pre-schools, child care centres, house-cleaners, babysitters, is now a major task for parents. They have to buy the right clothes, nappies, furniture, car-seats, baby food, toys, educational games for their pre-schoolers. They must monitor television programs, attend parent-teacher meetings, vet the quality of playmates. And for all this they must rely on experts and services for proper parenting.

Notice what is involved and what is implied for the family in this view: that parents have the executive know-how to find and use such services and the experts who provide them; that the services are available to all parents who need them; that the experts are able and willing to assist in parenting as those parents desire; that parents have the self-confidence and sense of power to demand expert help to service their needs.

Clearly, many parents at present do not possess such skills and are not assisted by professionals who use jargon and higher status to make parents feel powerless and incompetent. Experts prefer to teach courses in colleges rather than to be used as resources upon which parents can draw. They think in terms of formally set up kindergartens and pre-schools instead of early childhood education in the homes where know-how is desperately needed. They insist on entrance qualifications to courses, rather than open-entry courses on the most serious vocation of all – that of parenting. They deliver services but fail to recognise the existing competence and experience of people in the community who might also be used as resource people to improve the quality of child care in this country. That situation needs to be reversed so that parents (male and female, together or alone as solo parents) learn those executive skills and demand service, expect the right to know from professionals.

We should emulate the models of projects Head Start and Follow Through in the USA, linking education, medical-dental care, nutrition, psychological and social services, in a way that educates parents and uses community volunteers. Despite the early scepticism that Head Start was not a success, it has proved that the gap between home and school can be bridged in ways that have long-lasting positive effects on children.

We should emulate too, the British Haringey Reading Project (1979). Teachers in schools there showed parents how to hear their children read and encouraged them to do so at home. Children in these home collaboration

schools significantly improved their reading scores compared with children in control schools where no extra encouragement was given, and other children in schools where teachers gave special in-class support. What is most significant about the Haringey Project is that even parents with little formal education themselves became successful reading collaborators, their children showing marked interest and improvement. Given that language skills are the key to every child's ability to interpret the world and to find self-validation in it, this Project should be known to every person involved in pre-school education. It puts paid to the notions that parents are incompetent and that children from disadvantaged home backgrounds cannot be brought to higher levels of cognitive development given the right mix of family-based and professional help.

Knowing as we do how unequal families are in the economic and cultural resources they provide, our goal should be to build on each family context, assist parents in their efforts to develop young beings with a sense of their own self-worth. That can only be done with concerted social effort in a time where rapid social change leaves many parents floundering and their children adrift. It is up to you as early childhood educators to take up the challenge and find new ways of involving the community in assisting parents.

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